

At this time I'd like to invite you to turn in your Bibles to Ephesians 5:21-33. If you are using the Bible from the seat rack in front of you, you can find our text on page 949. And as you are turning there, I want to begin with an admission: *I love weddings.*

The most recent wedding I performed was for a couple from our church, Linda and Andrew. On their wedding day, the sun was shining beautifully, the venue had been decorated masterfully, the bride was beautiful, the groom dashing, and the atmosphere electric. But for me, the centerpiece of every wedding isn't the weather, the decor, or the dress—it's always the vows. We tend to think that wives and husbands make vows and then try to keep them, but the truth is that if we let them, the vows keep us. They keep us from selfishness, they keep us loyal, supportive, and loving.

**illus:** Perhaps you've heard the story of a groom approaching the pastor at the wedding rehearsal—he came with an unusual offer. *"Look, I'll give you \$500 if you'll change the wedding vows. When you get to the part where I'm to promise to 'love, honour and respect' and 'forsaking all others, be faithful to her forever,' I'd appreciate it if you'd just leave that bit out."* He pressed the cash into the pastor's hand and walked away with a smile on his face

The wedding day arrived, and the ceremony progressed to where the bride and groom would exchange their vows. Beginning with the groom, the pastor looked at the young man in the eye and said, *"Will you promise to prostrate yourself before your wife, obey her every command and wish, serve her breakfast in bed every morning, and swear eternally before God that you will not even look at another woman, as long as you both shall live?"* The groom gulped and looked around, and said in a tiny voice, *"Yes."*

After the ceremony had finished, the groom cornered the pastor in back hallway of the church. Looking around, to make sure no one was within earshot, the groom hissed, *"I thought we had a deal."* The pastor put the \$500 back into his hand and whispered, *"Your wife made me a much better offer."* I'm not sure who I'm most concerned about in this scenario, the husband, the wife, or the pastor!

In his letter to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul offered a sober assessment of the world around him—he saw a world that was divided and fractured. He saw division between Jews and non Jews, between women and men, children and parents, slaves and masters.

This was the visible reality that confronted Paul, but his heart had been captured by the vision of what the Father was doing through Christ, by the Spirit. Paul saw the dividing wall of hostility coming down—between the races, the sexes, and the classes. He believed that in Jesus alone we find level ground upon which all humanity can stand. I share Paul's vision.

In Ephesians 5:21-6:9, Paul addressed the every-day relationships that made up a 1st century Christian household—wives and husbands, children and parents, slaves and masters. This week we're going to look at what Paul had to say about the marriage relationship.

*"21 Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. 22 Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. 23 For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour. 24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything."*

*25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her 26 to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, 27 and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. 28 In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29 After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church— 30 for we are members of his body. 31 “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” 32 This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. 33 However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.”*

I’m going to do something this morning that I rarely do, and I need to beg your indulgence for the next few minutes—I want to share some of my convictions with you before I turn to this text.

You may be aware that the text I have just read belongs to a wider collection of texts that speak to issues of equality, gender, and leadership roles within the church. You may also be aware that many churches have divided over how to interpret this collection of texts—there are differing opinions on what Paul said to women and what he meant. Predictably, some on either side of the issue have claimed that their interpretation is true, while every other interpretation is false and dishonours God’s word.

After years of studying these Scriptures, reading many books and articles, and talking with people on both sides of these issues, I have come to my own conclusions and I want to share them briefly with

you. I want to say right from the beginning that you may not share my conclusions, but, we can still live in fellowship with one another.

Let me begin with the creation account. In Genesis 1 and 2 we are given two different accounts of God creating humanity. In Genesis 2, we are given a sense of chronology—man is created first, but he is alone and incomplete until God created woman. That isn’t to say that you need to be married to be complete, but that humanity images God as male **and** female. This is what we find in Genesis 1; we are told that God created humanity in His own image, male and female He created them. To both Adam and Eve, God gave the creation mandate—to fill the earth and steward it on God’s behalf. When I read Genesis 1, I am struck by the equality and partnership that God had in mind for men and women.

Let’s move on from creation to Jesus and the early church. I am struck by the almost scandalous ways that Jesus broke social boundaries in order to befriend and disciple women.

I am struck by the Acts 2 description of the Holy Spirit being poured out on women and men without gender preference or limitation. In 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4, Paul describes the gifts of the Holy Spirit—I can’t help but note that the Spirit’s gifts were not set aside into categories of “for men only” and “for women only”.

I am struck by Scriptures like Galatians 3:28 which declare that the former barriers that make some insiders and others outsiders—like gender, race, and economics—have been set aside in Jesus. In Jesus there is newfound freedom and equality.

Now so far, I have simply been stating what the Scripture says, but here is where the interpretation begins. Some would agree with what I've said but they are quick to point out that while Jesus befriended and disciplined women, His inner circle of 12 disciples were all men. And, quoting one author, while Paul does affirm women as leaders within the church, "he also expressly forbids (at least some) women to teach or to have authority over (at least some) men (at least sometimes)."<sup>1</sup>

So what is going on? From Genesis 3 onwards, the Bible describes a predominantly patriarchal society. When I use the word "patriarchal" I am referring to a system or society where men are given freedom, authority, and preference on the basis of their gender. But I want to suggest that while the Bible *describes* a patriarchal society, it doesn't *prescribe* it. In other words, the Bible is describing *the way things are* not prescribing *the way things should be*. I would argue that there isn't even a hint of patriarchy in the creation account, that comes later in Genesis 3, when sin entered the world and corrupted the relationship between Adam and Eve.

Jesus clearly wasn't seeking to overturn patriarchy, but did He press against it subversively in the way He treated women. As I read the Scriptures, there is a redemptive trajectory at play that is leading towards greater freedom and liberation—I see this in Jesus and I also see this in Paul. Now again, Paul wasn't seeking to overturn patriarchy, but we do see a kind of "doubleness" in Paul that fits with this redemptive trajectory.

And so, at times, Paul upholds the patriarchal structure by affirming men's role to lead, and at other times he opens the door to women. In the ancient world, women were not trained (or allowed) to exercise leadership or teach mixed groups in public, and so Paul forbids it in order to keep the gospel from scandal.

However, public prayer and prophecy didn't require training and so he expects that women will participate, and they do. Christianity was already considered scandalous because men and women worshipped together, they were taught together, they shared a common meal (The Lord's Supper). In the ancient world, men and women rarely mixed in public, or even ate meals together.

Throughout the book of Acts and Paul's letters, we see all kinds of "exceptions" to the dominant patriarchal culture. We see someone like Priscilla teaching a male preacher (Apollos) in order to correct his theology, we see Lydia leading the local church that met in her home, and Junia in the role of apostle. The Bible portrays women employing spiritual gifts in a variety of leadership roles, including apostle, prophet, teacher, evangelist, deacon, and house church leader.<sup>2</sup>

There was a redemptive trajectory at play, that was meant to lead to liberation for slaves and women; this liberation isn't a feminist addition to the gospel, it is a byproduct of the gospel itself. You may not share my conclusions on these matters, but we can still live in

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<sup>1</sup> John G. Stackhouse Jr., *Finally Feminist: A Pragmatic Christian Understanding of Gender*, 37.

<sup>2</sup> C.f. Rom. 16:7; Ex. 15:19-21; 1 Cor. 14:31; Acts 18:26; Romans 16:1.

fellowship with one another—what unites us is Jesus. While I believe there are interpretive issues to divide over, I don't believe this is one of them.

So let me turn our attention back to Ephesians 5:21-33. You will notice that Paul begins by speaking a word to the entire community, followed by a word to wives, and then a word to husbands—all the while he points to Christ's relationship to the church as our model. Let's begin with Paul word to the community.

**1. A Word to the Community, vs. 21:** *“Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.”* Though we cannot see this in our English translation, vs. 21 is a continuation of Paul's exhortation in vs. 18-20. In essence, Paul says:

*Be filled with the Spirit*, and those who are filled with and led by the Holy Spirit will...

- **speak to one another**  
with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit
- **sing and make music to the Lord**  
from your heart
- **give thanks to God**  
for everything  
in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.
- **submit to one another**  
out of reverence for Christ.

For a few weeks now we have been talking about the “before and after” effect that Jesus has in our lives—He is the Master Renovator. I probably don't say this often enough, but the life that Jesus invites

us to live is impossible unless we are regularly filled with the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

Submission doesn't “feel” natural to any of us—it requires sacrificial love, humility, and a willingness to prioritize others. But as the Holy Spirit fills us, we find ourselves submitting to Jesus, wanting to live for Jesus, wanting to give Him our attention, our time, our trust, and our love. Submitting to Jesus is the precursor to learning how to submit to others. In just a moment I'm going to talk about wives submitting to husbands but before I do, it's important to keep two things in mind:

(a) First, remember the diverse make up of the Ephesian church. Imagine with me that we've all been transported to this ancient church, that we're all a part of it, and, that we have been gathered to listen to a letter of instruction, sent by our founding pastor, Paul of Tarsus.

I arrive a few minutes early so that I can get a good seat and before long one of the leaders stands and begins to read the letter. As he makes his way through, at one point we hear him read, *“Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.”*

Take a moment and picture the different people who make up the gathering. Over here we have a number of slaves—they aren't there to serve but to be taught; over here there are a number of women and children, and then there are the men. Everyone would have been thinking the same thought: *“Did Paul just say that we need to submit to one another? Will men submit to women and slaves?”*

“*Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.*” This instruction, given in a 1st century patriarchal culture, was more than radical, it was unthinkable. Imagine how the men would have reacted. Imagine the women’s reaction. Imagine the slaves reaction.

(b) There’s one more thing to keep in mind. In Ephesians 5:22, Paul speaks about wives submitting to husbands, but sadly, this verse has been notoriously abused by husbands who want to control their wives. Remember, before Paul speaks about wives submitting to husbands, he speaks about practicing mutual submission within the church. Submission isn’t something wives do, submission isn’t something women do, submission is something all Christians do.

**2. A Word to Wives, 22-24, 33b:** let’s move on to look at Paul’s word to wives. “*Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour.*”

As I said earlier, in ancient patriarchal societies, women were viewed very differently than they are in our own. Women were minimally educated and given very little freedom. They could not adopt children, sign a contract, own or inherit property. Ancient writers such as Aristotle and Josephus spoke what was undoubtedly the general sentiment of the day—women were seen as inferior to men: physically, intellectually, and morally.<sup>3</sup>

You may be offended by this sentiment—I’m offended by this sentiment—but I can assure you that Paul’s word to wives would not have been offensive. If anything, it would have been the men who

felt threatened by the counter-cultural words that Paul spoke to husbands—we’ll get to those words in a few moments.

I’ve already suggested that implicit in the call to submission is a call to sacrificial love, to humility, and to willingly prioritize the needs of others. The church is to live in submission to one another and wives are to practice this same submission in their marriages.

At this time I want to draw your attention to vs. 23 and to a particular term that needs some explanation. Paul says that “*the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church*”. Our difficulty in defining what Paul means by “head” begins with our own English language. Our language employs phrases like “head of the house” or “head of the company”—these phrases imply words like “leader,” “decision-maker,” and “final authority”. But we must ask ourselves, is this what Paul had in mind?

In the New Testament, the word “head” is used five times to describe Jesus’ relationship to the church and twice in describing the husband—wife relationship. The word “head” can mean “leader,” “origin,” “first” in terms of chronology, or “pre-eminent,” but generally speaking, it’s the context that determines what the word means.

In Ephesians 5, Paul compares the husband’s headship of the wife to Jesus’ headship of the church, and so, the best way to discover what Paul means by the word is to look at the way he describes the headship of Jesus. Let’s turn our attention now to Paul’s word to husbands.

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<sup>3</sup> Klyne Snodgrass, *The NIV Application Commentary: Ephesians*, 303.

**3. A Word to Husbands, 25a, 28-29a, 31, 33:**

*25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her 26 to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, 27 and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. 28 In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29 After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church...each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.”*

**illus:** in 2002, a low budget movie became one of the highest-grossing romantic comedy of all time—*My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. It features Toula Portokalos, a single, 30 year old, Greek woman, who is struggling to break free from parents who are bound by patriarchal Greek culture. Her father wants her to find a nice Greek boy, get married, and have Greek babies, but Toula wants more.

At one point in the movie, Toula wants to take some computer classes and run her aunt’s travel business, but she knows her dad will not allow it. Toula says to her mom, “*Ma, Dad is so stubborn. What he says goes. “Ah, the man is the head of the house!”* Her mother’s reply is one of the most memorable lines in the entire movie: “*Let me tell you something, Toula. The man is the head, but the woman is the neck. And she can turn the head any way she wants.”*

In their home, the father is the head of the home, he is the decision-maker; he will determine if Toula goes to school and runs the travel business. And so mother and daughter set out to manipulate the father into making the decision they want, and tricking him into thinking it was his idea all along.

It’s all very comical when you see it on the screen, but I wonder, is this what Paul means by “headship”? Is this what it looks like for wives and husbands to relate to one another? The difficulty in comparing Jesus’ relationship to the church and the husband’s relationship to his wife is that it isn’t an identical comparison. Jesus is both the “head” of the Church and “Lord” of everything; husbands may be the “head” of their wife but they are not “Lord” of anything.

In the first century, a husband and father could culturally expect, and demand, complete obedience from his wife, children, and slaves, but Paul instructs men to allow Jesus to redefine how they relate to those in their household. When we look at Ephesians 5, we find that Jesus’ headship isn’t described in terms of power, authority, or decision-making. Instead, Jesus loves the Church, He lays down His life for the Church, He sacrifices everything so that the Church might become holy, radiant, and beautiful.

Husbands, when we look to Jesus we find that He refused to hold on to power and authority, He refused to use power to His own advantage. In fact, whatever power and authority He did have, was used to seek the good of others, at His own expense.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> C.f. Philippians 2:3-11.

Jesus frequently reminded His disciples that the one who would be great, must be the servant of all. Here in Ephesians 5, Paul defines headship in terms of sacrificial, self-giving love. Remember, Paul is speaking into a patriarchal society, and so, it's not surprising that he places a priority on the husband, but, he makes them responsible to live for the sake of his wife.

My wife and I do not have a perfect marriage—Paul's words still provide a challenge to us in how we live out our marriage. As a husband, I spend very little time thinking about whether Naomi is submitting to my needs and prioritizing my preferences. The moment we begin to keep score in marriage, is the moment that bitterness and resentment move in.

As a husband, I spend a lot more time thinking about whether I am loving Naomi the way Jesus loves the Church. Am I laying my life down for her sake? Are her needs, desires, and dreams important enough to me that I would lay aside my preferences for her sake? Have I made it my goal to what it takes to make sure that she grows in holiness, radiance, and beauty as we age together?

Who's in charge? Who has the power? Who makes the decisions? Jesus is in charge. The Spirit has the power. And together a husband and wife make decisions that honour Jesus and one another. There are times when a decision needs to be made in a certain arena and Naomi has greater experience and wisdom than I, in those cases I tend to defer to her—I trust her completely. There are times when the decision to be made affects her much more than I, again, in these decisions, I weigh in but tend to defer to her. In this way we submit to one another in reverence for Christ.

But I cannot think of a single, significant, life decision that we have ever made that wasn't arrived at mutually. When we strongly disagree with one another, we wait, we pray, and we talk until we can arrive at a solution.

**Conclusion:** as I conclude, I want to come back to Paul's word to the church. Remember, how Jesus loves us church! He gave up His life for us, to make something of us that we could never make of ourselves. As we follow Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, we are being made holy, radiant, and beautiful—He will not abandon the good work that He has begun in us; He will carry it on to completion.

There are not more important and less important people in Christ's Church, we are all His dearly loved children—we belong to Him and to one another. And so Paul says, submit to one another, as an act of praise for all that Jesus has done for us. May the Holy Spirit fill us today, as a church, as singles, as women, as men, as husbands, and wives.

**Prayer**